
Race and Racism in Archaeology: Introduction

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Race and racism in archaeology: introduction

Chris Gosden

Abstract

Race and racism have been subjects of much discussion throughout the humanities and social sciences, but archaeology has not participated in these discussions as fully as it might. This volume aims to aid as a spur to further discussion. Considerable debate revolves around whether racism is a modern phenomenon or is found more generally in human history. There seems little doubt that the systematic nature of racism as a key element of state power took on a new virulent form in the twentieth century, but rather more doubts are expressed about the longer history of racism. Race as a biological category is also in debate, with some biological anthropologists feeling that this is a useful term for describing geographically localized aspects of human variability. A range of views is represented in this volume. In this introduction I discuss the issue of race and racism more broadly, including how other cognate subjects have dealt with these issues.

Keywords

Race; racism; discrimination; power; racial science.

Discrimination is a word with two meanings. The first is positive: to be discriminating is to possess the ability to judge good from bad, to make fine judgements, enjoying a real command of the canons of taste within a particular social milieu. In its negative connotation discrimination is something practised against people of different colour, physical type, gender or sexual orientation. Only occasionally is this mode of discrimination positive: creating all-women shortlists for posts or preferentially selecting people of colour.

The two sets of practices denoted by the word discrimination are linked. All human beings make value judgements concerning other people and things all the time and these are based on the physical and formal qualities of persons and things. In many cases such judgements are changing and contextual – what is an appropriate object or mode of personal presentation in one context will seem disturbing or to demonstrate a lack of judgement in another. Mary Douglas's definition of dirt as 'matter out of place' emphasizes context and not the inherent qualities of materials themselves. Under certain

circumstances this fluidity of judgement gets stuck, so that certain things or people are always evaluated in a particular manner: gold always appears valuable; some groups are always denigrated or treated poorly irrespective of comportment or the morality of their actions. When such rigidity of judgement adheres to people we are in the vicinity of negative discrimination, which commonly focuses on certain modes of otherness such as gender, sexuality or race. Racism occurs when judgements about people always proceed from their physical features of their body; when biology is given social force. Value judgements concerning people and things are linked to power; systematic judgements are often used systematically to disempower.

From the perspective of the twenty-first century we are all too able to recognize racism and its effects. But we still need to uncover its history and prehistory. Are attributions of race made in all times and places, so that race is in some sense a natural way of understanding human difference; does a notion of race inevitably give rise to racism? All human societies as far as we know employ some sense of self and other, but we have much less grasp of how such concepts operate and what their effects are. There are reasons to doubt that all societies use categories of race, so that this mode of conception might operate only in particular social circumstances.

One potential advantage of a focus on race is that it allows a privileged understanding of structures of power and inequality. One pervasive argument about racism is that it is a product of colonial and capitalist relations over the last few hundred years, so that nothing like it existed in earlier periods of human history. Following this line of argument the fact that people of colour had a narrow range of roles, such as plantation worker, miner, household servant or slave, led to the attachment of a low-caste designation to their bodies and appearance. Lowliness of social and economic position transmuted into attitudes adhering to the body, helping to produce a thorough-going racism. Categories deriving from everyday encounters were reinforced by the racial sciences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. 'As it emerged in the later eighteenth century, the idea of "civilization" was seen as the destined goal of all mankind and was in fact often used to account for apparent racial differences. But in the nineteenth century more and more men saw civilization as the peculiar achievement of certain "races"' (Stocking 1968: 35–6). Throughout Europe there was a mass of data created through skull measurements, but also concerning skin colour, hair type and the general shape of the human body. Consistent attempts were made to link political and economic changes to physical type so that debates concerning whether Anglo-Saxon populations could be differentiated from the Romans in Britain created collaboration between anatomists and a nascent prehistoric archaeology (Davis and Thurnham 1865). Such debates ultimately concerned the origins of English or British identity and created some heat in the then present. Work was also carried out on the contemporary inhabitants of Britain in order to understand their history, with particular emphasis on the more primitive elements found on the Celtic fringes (Urry 1984). Here physical type was thought to be the key as to why some populations were more developed than others. Race was a constant element of self-understanding as well as a means of creating types for the Other and this was part of its power.

From these racial sciences have come contemporary views of race and biology. As with any species, human beings exhibit physical variation and variation can on occasion be seen to have a distinct geographical provenance – black skins from Africa and certain parts of

the Pacific, for instance. An observation concerning variety is to some degree uncontroversial, although many would have doubts about how easy it is to divide human variation into discrete categories, noting both the overall similarity of human beings and the variability that exists within any one group. Observations concerning human variation can be used to discuss race. Race turns into racism when variability in outward appearance is thought to correlate with other characteristics such as intelligence or moral character. Such views run counter to the belief that all humans are born equal, a cornerstone of liberal thought. A stress on equality leads people to conclude that human capabilities are distributed across populations in a complex manner totally uncorrelated to other features of the body or that nurture, not nature, makes us who we are. Views stressing equality and critiquing race were most urgently put forward in the aftermath of the Second World War to counter the direction of Nazi science. Montagu was very much a part of UN attempts after the war to deal with the bases and implications of racism and his *Statement on Race* (Montagu 1950) was an interpretative gloss on the *Statement by Experts on Race Problems* issued by UNESCO in 1950. Here a range of people, from biochemists, to psychologists, geneticists, physical and social anthropologists and educationalists (to name just some), allowed for some possibility that human variation could be seen in terms of race, but dismissed any claim that racial divisions might be the basis for other human capabilities. The fact that some discussion of race was retained even in a climate dealing with the immediate aftermath of fascism shows the long legacy of racial science. However, such works did contain the basis for the most prevalent contemporary view, which is that race exists solely as a social construction, as an idea and not as a fact grounded in biology (Wade 2004).

One central question of these immediately post-war discussions was whether racism is found only in modern times. Many argue that pre-modern states and empires did not throw up the conditions which made race and racism central to the exercise of power. Some would go further than this and say that not only was modernity vital for the concept of race, but that race was a key element of modernity.

The starkest exposition of this last idea is Bauman's (1989) *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Bauman sees racism as having a pre-modern root developed partly through romantic notions of folk and folk origins. However, it is only in modern times that racism has become an effective instrument of political practice. The rise of modern science capable of finely anatomizing human difference, modern technologies of surveillance, imprisonment and extermination and the exercise of a strong and intrusive state power all make the difference between earlier pogroms and the measured programme of extermination carried out by the Nazis. Modern forms of racial violence are characterized not so much by their scale, but rather their attention to detail and attempts at completeness. For Bauman there was a pathology to Nazi thought deriving from the particular conditions in Germany from the 1920s onwards, but the possibility of the Holocaust exists more generally within the conditions of modern state power. This is an idea not easily dismissed when looking at the increasingly repressive forms of government found in the early twenty-first century, where difference is dangerous and dealing with danger is seen as a crucial duty for any responsible government. Arnold, in this volume, has outlined the fundamental elements of Nazi racial science, as well as the manner in which archaeology, starved of funds, took advantage of the new programmes of research by the *Ahnenerbe* and others. Arnold shows that race did not

exist as a lone category and was linked by the Nazis to gender. The search for male-dominated warrior elites in German prehistory linked racial and behavioural characteristics around the idea of the Aryan.

Another of the great crucibles of discussion concerning race are the settler societies, such as those of North America. The driving out and extermination of native populations could be justified on grounds of racial fitness – the fact that native races had difficulty resisting incoming whites was taken to be a sign that some races were better able to dominate than others. Early modern capitalism and colonialism also drew in other groups as a source of labour, creating significant black populations in the Americas through slavery. To say that black people have not enjoyed the full fruits of the American dream is a statement of the obvious, but Mullins (this volume) shows that racial differences are not that easy to spot archaeologically and the investigation of poor, mainly black, neighbourhoods helps overturn stereotypes concerning poverty and powerlessness. Mullins also takes the view that race is a social construction, seeing it as a ‘subjectivity that seeks to disempower particular groups’. MacEachern tackles one of the main planks of racist thought – the idea that intelligence differs between racial groups and that such perceived differences have a long evolutionary heritage. A view that intelligence (as measured by IQ tests) has an evolutionary basis would, if accepted, provide a very different view from one which emphasizes nurture. As well as the critique of a series of dubious ideas and approaches (intelligence as a measurable phenomenon, certain approaches to evolution and race itself), archaeology has a role to play in showing both the creative variety of human cultures in the past and the fact that differences in performance in the recent past are due to social and economic circumstances, or the nature of the tests themselves, and are not grounded in biology. Elsewhere in the American continent, in Latin America, Curtoni and Politis explore the links between race and primitivism, two complex concepts with a linked history. The mapping of groups in Latin America was done within a spectrum from advanced to primitive where these evaluations were tightly tied to physical characteristics. They also demonstrate that diffusionism was often an important means of showing the spread of superior forms of life, borne in turn by superior sorts of people. Ideas linking race and achievement are the IQ test writ large – some populations were brighter and more creative than others, so that their superior forms of life were the systematic outcome of the application of inherited ability. Archaeology has an important role to play in a systematic critique of these ideas.

Given the overwhelming and devastating nature of racial politics over the last few centuries it is no surprise that many see racism as restricted to the modern world. However, other readings of history are possible. Smedley (1993) argues that pre-modern politics did have notions of race, although these did not give rise to racism as one of society’s most powerful arenas for legitimating power, providing a carefully nuanced view of the history of the concept and practices surrounding it. Various questions arise here, including: how powerful was the concept of race as a name given to power inequalities? And, once modern states arose with structures of control far in excess of earlier forms, how central was racism to these forms of control? Archaeology has a clear role to play (along with history) in looking at the discriminations made around the human body. In this volume there are two views at variance with each other concerning the ancient world. Isaac argues that racist thought was pervasive in both the Greek and Roman worlds.

There was a general view, he argues, that human characteristics were acquired from the environment in which people lived, so that groups were shaped by the external world and not through the inheritance of bodily substance. Race differences were perceived, but had a very different root, which was not fundamentally genetic (to use our modern term). The worry for expanding imperial powers, in Isaac's view, was that moving into less favourable environments would eventually have a debilitating effect on the conquerors. Such views remind us of particular strands within geography in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which linked climate and human physical and mental characteristics (Taylor 1946; see also Head 2000 for a longer discussion of such thought). Not only was race a potent category in Greece and Rome, Isaac contends, but discussions of race by ancient writers provided inspiration for thinkers of the Enlightenment when they were constructing modern conceptions of race.

To look at Mesopotamia, Bahrani feels, is to glimpse a very different world from our own in which spatial distance is the key to foreignness and not biology. The dichotomy between barbarian and civilized peoples was crucial to Mesopotamian society, but this was conceived of in terms of social action and morality, not race. On the other hand, Bahrani argues strongly, in the nineteenth century when studies of the ancient Middle East were constructed, race was basic to a scientific understanding of world cultures. It was assumed that the same racial lens for viewing the world existed from the fourth millennium onwards. The modern analyst projected their analytical categories onto the past and wrote and thought as if the people of Mesopotamia constructed their world through racial categories. Much more argument and thought is needed to evaluate the possible impact of racial thought in earlier periods of world history and a rich combination of archaeological and textual evidence will allow this to happen.

Two further papers in implicit disagreement are those by Ballard, on the one hand, and Bulbeck, Ragavan and Rayner, on the other. Ballard discusses a colonial 'Pygmy mythology' in which people in a range of continents, principally Africa, Asia and the Pacific, were seen to belong to a distinct race in which lack of stature and so-called primitive cultural traits were seen as correlated. Pygmies were not only identified in many places, but in most of these they were viewed as original inhabitants, pushed out by later groups. Pygmies are a classic case in which physical and cultural characteristics are seen as linked, although Western views of Pygmy character are complex, as Ballard shows. Ballard's paper represents a further exploration of the European imaginary, looking at the social constructions placed upon people on the basis of biology (see also Thomas (1994), for further views from the Pacific). Bulbeck et al. explore biological characteristics directly, looking at skull measurements from Australia and the Pacific. They discuss biological definitions of race, as particular bundles of correlated physical features, which might have a bounded geographical distribution. In Australia and the south-west Pacific, primarily Melanesia, they do recognize clusters of traits which differentiate this region from Southeast Asia. These might therefore be important historical indicators. They are equivocal, as the reader will see, as to whether these differences give support to a notion of race.

Archaeology has not seen many thoroughgoing discussions of race and racism. There is a concern in many areas that racial attitudes have gone underground, so that few would use the explicit language of race and racism, but still deploy allied concepts uncritically.

The lack of discussion of the race and racism is worrying in archaeology for this reason, but it also represents a significant absence within the social sciences, as the long-term perspective from archaeology could potentially throw more recent forms of racial thought into relief. Categories such as race are as much evident in people's actions as in their writings, often being deeply internalized. Evidence from material culture, which often derives from everyday practice, could be illuminating here. Archaeology has become especially adept at tackling forms of practice and their allied material means. Anthropology has seen regular discussions of race, deriving, as we have seen, from work immediately dating from around the Second World War (Benedict 1940; Montagu 1942), but with important contributions in more recent times (see the special issue of *American Anthropology* on race and racism edited by Harrison (1990)). In archaeology there have been important studies of particular times and places (Yentsch 1994), racial practices within archaeology itself (Shepherd 2003) or broader studies in which race figured (Hall 2000; Gosden 2004), but few concerted attempts to tackle the topic. We feel that this issue of *World Archaeology* starts to fill an important gap in our thought and hope that it spurs more work and debate around issues of race and racism.

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